### NORTH CAROLINA MILLION ACRE INITIATIVE

# STATUS REPORT

September 1, 2000

#### **OVERVIEW**

In 1999, Governor Hunt appointed an interagency task force on smart growth, known as the 21st Century Communities Task Force. This committee hosted a series of 14 community meetings across the state in both rural and urban areas. One of the strongest messages that came from these public meetings was the need for open space preservation. North Carolina=s special places and beautiful scenery are being swallowed by sprawl. Water quality is deteriorating, wildlife habitat is disappearing, public parks are overcrowded, and family farms are being lost to development. People made it clear that this is not what they want for the future of North Carolina.

Many of these problems can be meaningfully addressed through the permanent protection of open space and farmland. Buffers of natural vegetation along waterways can mitigate the effects of sedimentation and stormwater runoff, and can also provide habitat for wildlife. Protection of floodplains can provide wildlife habitat and recreation, while reducing the financial and human costs of disastrous floods. The purchase of easements can keep family farms economically viable in a developing region, and adequate, uncrowded public parks, trails, and greenways contribute immeasurably to the quality of life in our increasingly urbanized state.

The North Carolina General Assembly has responded to the need for additional open space protection by enacting the Million Acre Open Space Goal, asking North Carolinians to protect an additional one million acres of farmland, open space, and conservation lands by 2009. The Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) was directed to lead the Million Acre Initiative, and to plan and coordinate with other public and private organizations that are receiving and administering land for conservation purposes.

Significant open space protection efforts are already underway by local governments, private land trusts, and state agencies across the state. The Million Acre Initiative will not acquire land itself, but will work extensively with public and private partners to coordinate and assist their land acquisition efforts. Funding to accelerate public and private conservation land protection is expected to come from federal, state, local, and non-governmental sources.

## **PROGRESS**

The one million acres of protected open space and farmland will consist of lands permanently protected through acquisition, in fee simple or easement, by a public conservation agency or a private, nonBprofit conservation organization. Protected lands will contribute to one or more of the following public objectives:

- \$ Protect water quality, wetlands, and drinking water supplies

  For example, the state may restore wetlands or add river corridors and wetlands to the state

  gamelands, state parks, or state coastal reserves; counties and municipalities may protect

  water supply watersheds or riparian corridors.
- \$ Protect significant or sensitive natural areas, rare species, and wildlife habitat

  For example, the federal government may add land to the national forests or national parks;

  the state may acquire high quality natural heritage areas as state parks or state gamelands;

  local governments or private land trusts may protect areas identified in county natural

  heritage inventories.
- \$ Protect farmland and working forests from conversion to development

  County governments, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, or private land trusts may
  acquire easements on small family farms; the state=s Forest Legacy Program may protect
  working forest land with easements.
- \$ Protect scenic beauty and provide public access to outdoor recreation

  The state may acquire parks, recreational areas, and river or beach access areas; counties
  and municipalities may acquire parkland, trails, greenways, and urban green spaces.
- \$ Protect significant archaeological, cultural, and historic sites

  The state may acquire State Historic Sites; local governments and private non-profit
  organizations may protect historic farms or homesteads.
- Reduce risks to people and businesses from flooding

  The state may acquire farmland located in floodplains; local governments may buy out
  flooded homes and businesses with Federal Emergency Management Hazard Mitigation
  Funds.

Since the beginning of the Million Acre Initiative, about 50,000 acres of federal, state, local, and private lands in all of the above categories have been protected for open space purposes.

### COORDINATION

Protection of one million acres of farmland, parks, natural areas, and watersheds across North Carolina will involve the participation of many state and federal agencies, local governments, private land trusts, conservation groups, and other organizations involved with land conservation. Coordination among these many participants is needed to share ideas, to foster partnerships, to minimize duplication of effort, and to ensure that the Million Acre Initiative results in conservation of North Carolina=s most environmentally important lands.

Grant funding has been provided by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation to fund a one-year position to coordinate the Million Acre Initiative. Primary responsibilities of the position are 1) to develop and implement a communication network to keep all partners well informed; 2) to develop and implement a reliable and accurate database system for tracking land acquisition activities of multiple organizations; 3) to support and guide a regional open space planning effort; and 4) to serve as an information resource on open space protection issues and the status of the Million Acre Initiative.

Continued funding for the Million Acre Coordinator position will be needed.

## **DATA MANAGEMENT**

At present, data on open space currently protected in North Carolina is not easily accessible because it has never been compiled into a convenient information source. No system exists with which to track progress in achieving the goals of the Million Acre Initiative. DENR is developing an acreage tracking database for all of the federal, state, local, and private partner organizations. This database will be accessible from a million acre web page, enabling partners to report their acreage data with ease and consistency. Data will be maintained both numerically and in a Geographic Information System mapping format, making the information easily accessible for many purposes.

A letter has been sent to all of the local governments introducing the Million Acre Initiative and asking them to share their current data on acreage of open space. Data are also being collected from federal, state, and private partners.

### **FUNDING STUDY**

The Environmental Finance Center at UNC is undertaking a study of the costs and possible financing mechanisms for the Million Acre Initiative. After convening two stakeholder meetings in early 2000, Center Director Richard Whisnant and Research Associate Dick Norton have consulted many people experienced in North Carolina's conservation lands acquisition. They have collected data from state and federal agencies, local governments, nonprofit land trusts and environmental groups, business

and development interests, and academics. They are now assimilating the data from these consultations into a model that estimates the likely amount of land that will be protected in North Carolina with present funding levels during the period of the Million Acre Initiative. Once that estimate is derived, they will suggest different approaches for closing and funding the "gap" between existing land protection efforts and what will be needed to accomplish the goals of the Million Acre Initiative.

### **REGIONAL PLANNING**

Careful planning and public input at the local and regional levels should be at the core of determining priorities for specific protection projects which will contribute to the one million acres. Currently, federal, state, local, and private conservation organizations each develop plans for accomplishing their individual missions, but these plans are seldom integrated. Open space protected in different jurisdictions should work together to provide continuous trail connections, extended wildlife habitat, and effective water quality protection. A planning process is needed to foster communication among partner organizations and to ensure that the lands protected are those most important for achieving the million acre objectives.

Coordinated open space planning should take place at a regional level, using a planning area large enough to address issues of interconnections between jurisdictions but small enough so that all affected organizations can realistically participate. In the six-county triangle region, the Triangle J Council of Governments, the Triangle Land Conservancy, and DENR have partnered to develop a Triangle GreenPrint -- a plan to identify and protect an interconnected, functioning regional open space system. The planning process will involve local governments, regional, state and federal agencies, non-profit organizations, universities, and private individuals working together to identify the types of open space needed to protect water quality, to sustain wildlife populations, to provide for public recreation, and to maintain the economic viability of family farming. The participants will identify opportunities for linkage and the accomplishment of multiple objectives, and will identify strategies, organizations, and funding sources to help implement the plan.

Several other counties and regions of the state have already begun open space planning efforts and these will be supported by the Million Acre Initiative, not duplicated. Coordination between regional planning units to identify potential interconnections will be addressed at the state level.

#### FARMLAND PRESERVATION

The 2000 General Assembly appropriated over \$1.5 million to the state's Farmland Preservation Trust Fund, the largest appropriation this program has ever received. The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has contracted with the Conservation Trust of North Carolina,

a private non-profit land trust, to administer a program to award grants for the purchase of easements or development rights on participating farms. The program is completely voluntary and provides financial support for farmers who wish to continue to farm their land rather than see it sold for development.

Grant applications have been mailed to the 14 North Carolina counties with a farmland preservation program in place, to all of the state=s Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and to all qualified private land conservancies. Any of these organizations may apply for a grant and may purchase and hold easements on working farms. Grant applications are due by December 10. The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services will make the grant award decisions in January 2001.